

Land of Myths and Faith

Discover Guatemala's Richness Through its People

Article & Photos by Jim Kane of Culture Explorers



Passersby admire the stunning carpet of the Armas family in Antigua, Guatemala. Designs and templates are worked on for months leading up to the all-night construction marathon before the Good Friday processions.

At 4 a.m. the cobblestone lanes of Antigua, Guatemala were already buzzing with couples, families, and tourists strolling, eating, chatting, and taking photos of the dozens of works of art springing to life before their eyes. Colored sawdust, pine needles, and flowers were the materials for the most elaborate and spectacular Easter-week alfombras (carpets) in the western hemisphere.

I had come to Guatemala to rediscover a country I hadn't seen since 1998. Perhaps because my timing coincided with Easter-week celebrations, one of the most lasting impressions of my 3-week journey was the strength of faith of so many here and its expression in so many forms.

Still half-awake, I followed my feet from carpet to carpet, enjoying the festive pre-dawn atmosphere. Suddenly, I stopped in my tracks, facing a carpet of magnificent beauty. Ninety feet long, with intricate scenes of brightly colored flora and fauna, this was a masterpiece in a city with an abundance of beautiful art.

Miguel Angel Armas represents the third generation of carpet builders in a family that has constructed an alfombra for the Good Friday processions for 48 consecutive years. Red-eyed from exhaustion, he was quick to give credit to the assembled family members and friends.

The process of building the carpet started 10 months before, when the theme for this year was decided. "It doesn't have to be a religious theme," Miguel Angel explained to me. "Each year we try something different and each year we try to improve on the last."

Three months before the processions a team of five designers cut the wooden templates used for the final dyed-sawdust marathon of carpet construction. The final work began the evening before and finished around 8 a.m. on Good Friday, just about one hour before 80 men carrying an enormous altar of Christ would trample this masterpiece into oblivion.

"Why do you do this year after year," I asked Miguel Angel, thinking of the enormous cost in money and time. "Fé," he said simply. Faith. He later told me, as we sat flipping through photo albums in his home, that the family was already thinking of what to do for the 50th anniversary alfombra two years from now.

I left Miguel Angel's home with an enormous appreciation of the power of faith and a personal invitation to join him and his family for next year's carpet. "I want everyone who participates to feel like family," he had told me earlier in our first conversation at 5 a.m. At 3 p.m., as we said goodbye, I already did.



A procession participant carries the cross in a re-enactment of Christ's burden during Antigua's week-long Semana Santa celebrations.

Laguna Chicabal

Far to the west of Antigua's colonial charms, Laguna Chicabal, the crater lake atop the dormant volcano of the same name, is situated in the dramatic Mayan highlands near Quetzaltenango—Guatemala's second city. Here I met Ifrain, a Mayan priest and guide who took me around the mysterious lake sacred to the local Maya.

A white mist cool and damp emanated from the shore of the lake only meters away from the Mayan ceremonial site where we had stopped for a rest and a story, one of many Ifrain would share over the course of the day.

He told the story of a penniless old man who had come to Chicabal on the day of his town's fiesta because he had no money to buy a costume for the celebration. A horse-man appeared before the old man. "Why are you not in town celebrating?" he asked.

Ifrain mimicked the clip-clop sounds and movement of the horse and rider. After a lifetime of storytelling, he had developed an unhurried, rhythmic tone to his tales.

It turns out that the god of Chicabal gave the old man a splendid outfit for the fiesta as a gift, with the one condition that he never mention from where it came or he would die. Once back in town, the old man's buddies were amazed and also cunning. They plied the old man with alcohol until he finally let slip the secret and, wham, he was catapulted into the lake to his death.

The afternoon with Ifrain was filled with his recital of legends and stories as we hiked our way around the mist-shrouded rim of the sacred lake, down though narrow mountain paths, and past ghostly rows of corn.

Whereas some secrets are better left untold, this is surely not one of them: Guatemala is full of treasures for those who seek them, not least of which is meeting the people behind the diverse faces of faith that make this country one of the richest cultural destinations in the Americas.



Jim Kane is the President and co-founder of Culture Xplorers. Having lived in 6 countries and traveled through 40 more, Jim now creates immersive trips to Latin America with a focus on people. Through festivals, home-stay opportunities, living traditions and positive impact projects, Culture Xplorers promotes genuine interaction between travelers and locals. Visit Jim & Culture Xplorers at www.cultureexplorers.com

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